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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000727

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE AUTHORITIES SECURE RELEASE OF ONE ICRC  
HOSTAGE

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On April 2, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) kidnappers on Jolo Island released Filipino hostage Mary Jean Lacaba, one of three International Committee of the Red Cross workers abducted by the terrorist group on January 15. Philippine authorities said she was in good health. Lacaba said that she had last seen fellow hostages Andreas Notter and Eugenio Vagni at 6:00 p.m. on April 2. Her safe return came after the Philippine government rejected the ASG's demands for a full troop withdrawal and ordered the military to close in on the kidnappers. The Ambassador met April 3 with Secretary Hermogenes Esperon, head of the presidential management staff, and he confirmed that the Philippine government was still committed to securing the safe release of the remaining hostages but that military preparations were ongoing in the event the kidnappers refused to surrender the ICRC workers. END SUMMARY.

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FILIPINO HOSTAGE RELEASED  
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¶2. (C) The tense situation surrounding the fate of three International Committee of the Red Cross workers (ICRC) abducted January 15 by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) took a positive turn on April 2, when Filipino hostage Mary Jean Lacaba was released to Sulu Vice Governor Lady Anne Sahidullah. Lacaba was freed around 9:00 p.m. and turned over to the military for a medical examination and debriefing. Philippine authorities later flew her to Manila to meet with her family.

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SITUATION HANDLED WELL SO FAR  
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¶3. (C) The Ambassador met with Secretary Hermogenes Esperon, Director General of the Presidential Management Staff, on April 3 to discuss the ICRC hostage situation. Esperon, former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, said that Western Mindanao commander LTG Allaga had handled the crisis well. Referring to the release of Lacaba, Esperon said there was always a negotiation on-going while the military was preparing for action. The Ambassador asked if money had exchanged hands, to which Esperon demurred, saying that there was a "perception on the street that the Italians are known for always paying," but he declined to elaborate.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador commended the Philippine government for its handling of the situation to date and for not agreeing to terrorist demands. Esperon replied it was

"outrageous" that anyone would expect the Philippine government to turn over Jolo Island to a known terrorist organization. He said that the Arroyo administration saw the USG as the one government who seemed to understand the delicate balance involved and was not trying to get the Filipinos simply to give in to terrorists. Esperon said the Philippine government was frustrated with the ICRC for refusing Philippine security and ignoring the military's warning that the location they were visiting was not safe without escort. The Ambassador emphasized U.S. concern for the hostages' safety and noted that the USG's key role in supporting the ICRC. Esperon thanked the Ambassador for all the support provided by the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines on Jolo Island and for the offer of additional humanitarian assistance for the hostages upon their release.

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ICRC THANKFUL FOR ASSISTANCE  
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15. (C) Philippine ICRC head Jean Daniel Tauxe called POLCOUNS April 3 and thanked the USG for all its help in Manila and on Jolo Island. Tauxe said Mary Jean Lacaba was now in Manila seeing a doctor, and she and her family were shielded from the press. According to Tauxe, Lacaba has no significant physical or apparent psychological injuries and seemed "amazingly well" considering her ordeal. Tauxe said Lacaba's two fellow hostages, Andreas Notter and Eugenio Vagni, were alive as of 6:00 p.m. on April 2, when she last saw them. At that time, she was taken to another nearby

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village and turned over unceremoniously to Sahidullah. For her part, Sahidullah told Tauxe that she had been called in the afternoon and told to show up on the outskirts of a town, and when she arrived, Lacaba was there.

16. (C) Tauxe said that Lacaba claimed that while she and her fellow hostages were sometimes tied up, at no time did they seriously fear for their lives, except when the AFP launched its assault, when they thought they might be injured by collateral damage. ASG commander Albader Parad appeared to be in charge of the operation, and was indeed injured when the AFP fired at him last month, but not incapacitated. For his part, Tauxe was deeply appreciative the Mission's support and said he would keep us apprised of developments over the weekend.

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REACTIONS TO LACABA'S RELEASE  
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17. (C) Media reported Philippine officials' predictably positive reaction to Lacaba's release. President Arroyo said Lacaba's release from captivity was an "answered prayer" and validated the government's policy of "dealing firmly with any form of lawless behavior." Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said "after this, we have to deal more aggressively, more decisively and more deeply with the issue of terrorism and kidnapping," and hoped the remaining hostages could be released as early as next week. Separately, National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales said he expected the crisis to be resolved "in a few days."

18. (C) Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno said government forces will remain in position as long as the two other hostages are still in the hands of the ASG. He said the release of one of the hostages was an indication of willingness to release the others. "Our focus is trying to make sure these kidnappers will get back in the direction of negotiations." Defense Secretary Teodoro stressed that government policy on the situation is to ensure the safety of the hostages and to avoid "precipitous action" that would endanger their lives. Defending the declaration of a state of emergency in Sulu, Teodoro said it was a "valid exercise

of power by the local executives as part of the effort to  
address a local situation."  
KENNEY